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THE PRESS AND THE PENTAGON PAPERS

In trying to gain a better appreciation for the proper role of the press in American society today, recognition should be given the newspaperman's own self-image. The author, a particularly outspoken and eloquent advocate of an active and inquiring press, sets forth some of his views on the failings of the press in Vietnam in light of the recent publication of the "Pentagon Papers."

by

Mr. Neil Sheehan

Introductory remarks, subsequently edited by the author, to a panel discussion on "Communications Media" at the Naval War College.

Panel Participants:

Mr. Joseph C. Harsch
Mr. Neil Sheehan
Mr. Barry Zorthian

This morning I would like to speak briefly about the press and the Pentagon Papers. We in the press have been drawing lessons from the Pentagon Papers for everyone else—lessons for the Vietnam policymakers, lessons for the military institutions, lessons for the Congress. I think it is just as important that we draw a lesson or two from the Pentagon Papers for ourselves. In seeking to outline some lessons this morning, I speak solely as a journalist and not in any way for *The New York Times*. I shall merely raise the lessons as I see them in the hope that they may stimulate others outside the news media to pose further questions regarding the role of the press in our society.

The Pentagon Papers show the magnitude of the mistakes in official decisionmaking on Indochina over most of three decades. Where the press is concerned, the papers demonstrate our failure to adequately report on American involvement in Indochina over that same period. How did we fail? Our most serious shortcoming, in my opinion, was that we did not raise in our reporting truly essential questions about American policy in Indochina. We questioned the details of policy. We did not question the substance.

Let me give you some examples from my own experience in Vietnam during my first tour as a reporter there from April of 1962 to April of 1964. These were the critical years of the Kennedy commitment and the early policy moves of the Johnson administration which preceded the entry of American ground and air combat forces into full-scale war in 1965.

I and other journalists in Vietnam then reported that the Diem regime was corrupt and unpopular; we reported that the Saigon army lacked motivation and leadership; we reported that the Vietcong guerrillas were winning the war and that Washington's allies in Saigon were gradually losing the conflict. Our reporting was much criticized. Actually, our dispatches reflected the doubts of the dissidents within the American mission itself. These were usually younger members of the mission, both civilian and military. From Embassy officers in Saigon to military advisers in the field, they all had considerable doubt about whether policy was working. Their superiors were also not listening to them. The reporters in the country were the only people who paid attention to what they had to say, and so they talked to us rather frankly about what they thought was going on in Vietnam. What they believed was reflected in large part in our dispatches, and I think that in retrospect their dissidence over the working of policy has been well vindicated by history. The Kennedy administration's policy of supporting the Diem regime simply was not succeeding. As we now know, the Vietcong were winning the war in those early years. The Saigon administration and army did lack motivation and leadership.

Nevertheless, we the journalists, and this also applies to those dissenters over policy within the official mission itself, assumed that a policy of preserving a non-Communist South Vietnam and of defeating the Vietcong guerrillas could be made to work if only the right formula could be found to implement it. We assumed that what was needed, among other ingredients, was a better non-Communist government in Saigon, more effective American political and military advice, more psychological warfare, and less destruction in the countryside. We would go on at great length, for example, about the fact that psychological warfare was not being sufficiently emphasized by the American military. As a lesson, we would all repeat to ourselves the anecdote about the psychological warfare specialist who told a senior military adviser, a U.S. Army brigadier general, that the war could not be won without better psychological warfare to convert the peasantry to the Saigon government's cause. To this remark the general replied: "How many Communists are there in this country?"

"Twenty-five thousand Vietcong on the books, General," the civilian adviser answered.

"Well," the general said, "if we kill 25,000 Vietcong, it will be over. We don't need any psy war. If you kill enough, you'll win the war."

At the time this, to us, was the height of simpleton thinking. What was clearly needed, we thought was fewer bombs and more sophisticated psychological warfare techniques to win the confidence and support of the Vietnamese people. We assumed, and I repeat this for emphasis, that policy could be made to work provided the right formula, the right mixture, could be developed. We assumed that it was actually possible "to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people," in the phrase so common in those years. More importantly, we assumed that the United States ought to be in Vietnam attempting to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese. We assumed that we, the Americans, knew what was best for the Vietnamese. And we assumed that it was within the power of Americans to

so mold Vietnamese society that this good, in our definition, could be achieved.

Perhaps we were the simpletons, because our mistake, our failure, was of greater magnitude than the general's. We in the press failed to ask whether the United States should be in Vietnam at all. We journalists raised questions about whether the strategic hamlet program was working in the countryside, but we never asked whether the United States should be attempting any such program and whether it really ought to be involved in Vietnam to the extent it was. We never seriously asked whether it was possible to achieve American objectives in Vietnam. We never asked whether it might be a greater evil for the Vietnamese people to have a large American military force in their country and an endless war destroying their homeland than it would be for the average Vietnamese to live under a Vietnamese Communist regime, however dour and brutal that regime might be by American ideals. (And you will note that I use the word ideals and not standards, because we now know how far our own standards can deviate from our ideals in our conduct toward other nations.) We never asked whether the Vietnamese Communist movement was, in fact, a basically national Communist movement that would, therefore, act independently from both Moscow and Peking whenever the Vietnamese Communists saw fit.

We assumed that Hanoi's aims, if not directed by Moscow and Peking, at least coincided with those of the two major Communist powers.

We assumed other things. We assumed, for example, that Indochina was of great strategic value to the United States. We had heard this said so many times that we just repeated the words. Indochina was strategic, that was that. We never truly addressed the question. I believe there is now considerable evidence, as we reexamine our experience during World War II, that Indochina may, rather, be a strategic backwater of relatively little importance to the United States in Asia.

Indochina played a relatively minor role in the naval war with Japan that won the United States dominance over the Pacific. The Japanese forces in Indochina remained in control there until the end of the war. There was even an abortive effort by the Allies to use them for a period of time after the Japanese surrender to maintain a semblance of order in Indochina until sufficient British and Nationalist Chinese forces could arrive. The American involvement in Indochina during World War II, if you look at it closely, was quite minimal, and our military leaders who achieved victory in the Pacific regarded Indochina as a secondary theater.

Why did we journalists not ask these basic questions about American policy in Vietnam? A partial answer is that we reporters were products of the cold war thinking in this country during the 1950's. We carried the assumptions of the cold war into Vietnam as our mental baggage. We had grown up and had been educated in the years when these assumptions were bedrock axioms and attitudes in our society.

Another partial answer to the question of why we did not ask the fundamental questions about policy is that we were operating, more or less, with the tools of a police reporter. We were primarily concerned with detail. This concern, by the way, is one of the strengths of the journalist. He seeks to gather together the small pieces of a given situation and to present them in a manner that the average reader can comprehend. The journalist's analysis of a situation gains power from his knowledge of detail. But this strength can become a grave flaw if carried too far, and in Vietnam, now that I look back upon my reporting there, I realize that we did become preoccupied with detail.

We became so obsessed with the details of policy implementation that we could not see the forest for the trees. What we needed to complement the method of the police reporter were the tools of the historian and the sociologist. We needed a broader perspective in order to develop the truly thoughtful and provocative reporting necessary to a subject like Vietnam during those critical years of 1962, 1963, and 1964. But instead we accepted the assumptions of policy, we accepted the world as someone else had delineated it, and we scrutinized the details of this world through a narrow magnifying glass.

It is ironic for a reporter to read the Pentagon Papers and to discover that the most profound examination of Indochina policy during these years was being conducted within the U.S. intelligence community. The intelligence community was questioning the foundations of policy. We now know that this questioning was not heeded by the policymakers in government. They had developed the theories of the cold war that the rest of us took whole. Nevertheless, it is very uncomfortable for a journalist to learn that the intelligence community was asking in secrecy the questions that he should have been asking in public. For instance, I was astonished to read a CIA memorandum written in June of 1964 for the President of the United States which questioned the validity of the domino theory. At that time I still accepted the domino theory as scripture, and I wrote about it as such. If South Vietnam fell, all of Southeast Asia would fall too, and perhaps the rest of Asia as well. Now that I reread my writing of that period, I wish that I had asked the same questions that CIA analyst did, instead of parroting what some supposed authority had told me.

The second major lesson that we in the press can draw from the Pentagon Papers is that we have allowed ourselves too frequently to be used by the power managers within the executive branch as a tool to further policy. News management succeeded to quite a degree when you look at the performance of the news media on Vietnam in retrospect. There is a saying that it all comes out in *The New York Times.* We who work for *The Times* like to believe that. I learned when I read the Pentagon Papers that it is simply not true. All does not come out in *The New York Times.* In fact, *The Times* was used just as much as most other newspapers during those years, and while we are more wary now, we are still used too often by the power managers within the executive branch in Washington.

Let me give you an example of what I am talking about—the infiltration of men and arms from North Vietnam into the South. When you read the Pentagon Papers you discover that the policymakers in Washington during the first half of the 1960's regarded the infiltration of guerrillas and arms into the South as primarily important in order to justify U.S. involvement in Indochina to the American public. The intelligence analyses told them—and the policymakers appear to have believed these analyses—that the infiltration did not have a significant impact on the war in the South. The infiltration was not seen as seriously affecting the fortunes of the Vietcong guerrillas against the Saigon government. Again and again, the intelligence analyses stated that the essential elements of Vietcong strength lay in South Vietnam.

Yet in the Pentagon Papers you find a continuing search by the policymakers for information about the infiltration of men and arms from the North, in order to justify gradually increasing American involvement in Vietnam as the fortunes of the Vietcong waxed and those of the Saigon government waned. You then find this information on infiltration being leaked in calculated fashion to the press through background briefings and other public relations techniques. You

find that at one point the Johnson administration thought it was leaking this information too rapidly and building up so much popular pressure that the decisionmakers might be forced to bomb North Vietnam before they believed it was necessary to do so. If you read the Pentagon Papers, you will find that in December of 1964 Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State at the time, secretly instructed Gen. Maxwell Taylor, then the American Ambassador in Saigon, to shut off leaks to the press about a major increase in infiltration so that the Washington policymakers would not be forced prematurely into bombing the North. When I read that sort of thing as a journalist, I realize that my impression in 1964 that I was fairly well informed was indeed a misimpression.

Well, I have tried to outline for you this morning two basic lessons which I hope that we in the press may draw from the Pentagon Papers. Let me end by stating a third lesson which I hope that all of us as American citizens can draw from that record of U.S. policy in Indochina. That lesson is suspicion of power. The American Presidency has acquired too much majesty for our own good. We must learn to be more suspicious and skeptical of our Presidents, regardless of what party they represent, and we must act with suspicion and skepticism toward all those high officials who wield power in the name of the President from behind the shield of the Presidency. We must be skeptical of the wisdom of these men; we must doubt their motives; we must be suspicious of their actions. For suspicion of power is, in my opinion, the central lesson of the Pentagon Papers for all of us—for the press, for the Congress, for the courts, for the general public, and for those of you in the military institutions who affect policy by the ideas you put forward for your superiors and the orders you accept without qualm. If we do not learn this lesson, I believe that it is going to become increasingly difficult for our country to survive as a democratic society over the long term. And the lesson of suspicion and skepticism will have to be learned particularly well by those of us in the press if we are to do our job effectively and to be useful to ourselves and to society as a whole in the years to come.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Mr. Neil Sheehan is a distinguished journalist and reporter with the Washington Bureau of *The New York Times*. He graduated from Harvard University in 1958 and served for several years thereafter with the United Press International in the Far East. In 1964 he joined *The New York Times* as a reporter, was subsequently assigned as Department of Defense correspondent in 1966 and White House correspondent in 1968. In 1969 Mr. Sheehan assumed his present position as reporter on national security affairs with the Washington Bureau of *The New York Times*.

Ψ

You think we lie to you. But we don't lie, really we don't. However, when you discover that, you make an even greater error. You think we tell you the truth.

Lord Tyrrell, Permanent Undersecretary of the British Foreign Office, to a reporter